

Lincoln

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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## IX.

### ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

THE multitude of sketches that have been written on the life, character and public services of Abraham Lincoln make me hesitate in speaking of the impressions of him that were left on my mind by daily contact with him during the first year of his administration of the Presidency. This hesitation is rather increased than diminished when I consider that his fulsome eulogists, under the garb of confidential friends, have so surrounded his memory with a halo of deity that to speak of him as I saw him may be looked upon as a misrepresentation. The tragedy of his death, and the tight hold he had upon the popular heart at that time created the opportunity for opening the flood-gates of flattery, which, to a great extent, have obscured the true character of the man.

I first saw him in Harrisburg, on an evening in February, 1861, as he emerged from the side door of the Jones House, in the judicious act of flanking any hostile movement that might be developed by the

threatening attitude of Baltimore as he proceeded to Washington and his fate. At that time, although conceding to him honesty of intention, I did not accept him as an oracle. My political education had been in the strict construction school, and I had only then returned from South Carolina to place myself on the side of the Union. Knowing the earnestness and intensity of the feeling in the South I looked upon his speeches from the text of "nobody hurt" as belittling the gravity of the situation. Towards the close of April, 1861, however, I was called to Washington as military telegrapher in the Department of War, and in that capacity came in contact with Mr. Lincoln many times daily, and often late at nights. He was always on terms of easy familiarity with the operators, and it was through that familiarity that my acquaintance with him was formed.

I soon saw a man before me with a kind heart and charitable disposition, who had a duty to perform that he intended performing with a conscientious exactitude. In the many telegrams he indited or dictated, and in the conversations he had with Secretary of State Seward, who almost invariably accompanied him to the war telegraph office, he displayed a wonderful knowledge of the country, its

resources and requirements, as well as an intuition of the needs and wants of the people.

He was entirely unselfish, and in his exalted position did not seem to think of himself for himself.

The great cause of perpetuating the Government entrusted to his care seemed to absorb his whole time and thought. When he acted it was from a sense of duty, and whatever the effect such action might have upon himself I don't think influenced him pro or con.

There was nothing ornamental in or about him, and to depict him in the ornamental light is to detract from his true greatness, which consisted of his being a true representative of a great people and a great principle of government.

Mr. Lincoln's shining characteristic was his extreme simplicity. He thoroughly recognized the true import of his position to be the serving of the people, and he tried to so conduct the administration of affairs that whoever looked upon him in the presidential chair should see reflected the power, the intelligence, the charity, the greatness of a great nation. His acts were all studied in the school of duty, and were, to the extent of his information, the expressions of the national will. This was nowhere more notable than in his issuance of the Emancipa-

tion Proclamation. To make him a god of freedom on account of his promulgating that paper which released the country from the curse of slavery is to give him attributes he never claimed, and to imply motives he would have spurned.

The Emancipation Proclamation was not issued solely in the cause of freedom, or solely to liberate the slaves, for Mr. Lincoln and the political party which had elevated him to the presidential office were committed to the strange doctrine that although slavery was an evil not to be extended yet it was to be tolerated and protected because of its existence. He announced most earnestly in his inaugural address that he had no purpose to interfere, directly or indirectly, with the institution of slavery in the States where it existed. That he did not depart from that policy until he was obliged to do so by the stern necessities of war and the readiness of the people for such departure, is a matter of historical fact. It is true he entertained emancipation views, but they were based upon emancipation by compensation, attended by colonization that was to be reached through independent State action. When General John Cochrane, of New York, in the fall of 1861, suggested and advocated the arming of the slaves, and Simon Cameron pressed



for the same object in Cabinet councils, both knowing that it was a practical emancipation measure, and that the slave, by its adoption, would become his own emancipator, Mr. Lincoln did not second them in their efforts because he did not think it the will of the people.

He declared his purpose to be the execution of the laws and the maintaining the union of the States inviolate. But as the war of the rebellion drew on apace, larger and larger in its proportions, and fiercer and fiercer in its animosities, with variable results to the contending parties, the emancipation of the slaves became an absolute military necessity and with that came the Emancipation Proclamation. Its origin and standing rests nowhere else. The slaves were declared free, not because slavery was wrong, but for the same reason that the enemy's horses, cattle, houses, wagons and lands were taken from him—to cripple him in his resources.

It was duty to the country, not justice to the slave, and Abraham Lincoln claimed no other credit.

He was not a god, and it is unseemly sacrilege to paint him in colors wherein he might be mistaken for such. He was a man with all the attributes that enter into manhood. He had all the tastes, ambitions, affections, longings and passions of other men,

but he had them under complete control, so they might be used for the benefit of common humanity, and not alone for self-gratification.

There was nothing false about him, for while he might curtain his thoughts and intentions as a matter of temporary policy it was not for the purpose of deception, but simply to guard against the plucking of unripe fruit.

It was not into ancestors' graves that Abraham Lincoln dug for the clothes that were to clothe him in the garb of manhood. He studied the laws of his Creator to find the material from which to shape them, and he found it.

Despoiled of his titles, honor and power, and introduced solely as the homely, honest man he was, into that American society that seeks the tracery of a ducal coronet on its escutcheon, and that obtains its principal sustenance from the phosphorescent light emanating from the bones of long buried ancestors, he would have been thrust out as an unwelcome guest.

Whilst he was kind and tolerant to those of different opinions from his, and freely communicated with all those with whom he came in contact, yet he impressed me with being a man who had but one confidant, and that confidant himself.

Before coming to a conclusion, I will narrate some anecdotes of the man that came under my personal observation:

In the fall of 1861 fires in Washington City were of frequent occurrence, without any organized adequate means for rapidly extinguishing them being in existence there. This condition of affairs was a source of so much anxiety to the country at large that no sooner was a Washington fire announced in the newspapers of the principal cities than the mails would teem with patriotic offers to the President, from all sections, for the formation of fire brigades, as a component part of the army, for the protection of the Capital. This was one of the many great annoyances of irrelevant subjects thrust upon the President in those trying times, but he bore it all as part of the responsibilities resting upon him; yet at last he was compelled to rebuke it from sheer lack of time to give it any attention. One night the Washington Infirmary burned down, and, as was customary after such a disaster, the next day brought the President the usual complement of offers for fire engines and firemen. Philadelphia's patriotism, true to its traditions, could not await the slow progress of the mail, but sent forward a committee of citizens to urge upon the President the acceptance of a fully

equipped fire brigade for Washington. On their arrival at the White House they were duly ushered into the Executive Chamber and courteously and blandly received by Mr. Lincoln. Eloquently did they urge the cause of their mission, but valuable time was being wasted, and Mr. Lincoln was forced to bring the conference to a close, which he did by interrupting one of the committee in the midst of a grand and to-be-clinching oratorical effort, by gravely saying, and as if he had just awakened to the true import of the visit, "Ah! Yes, gentlemen, but it is a mistake to suppose that I am at the head of the fire department of Washington. I am simply the President of the United States." The quiet irony had its proper effect, and the committee departed.

The personal familiarity of Mr. Lincoln, shown in his intercourse with the war telegraphers already spoken of, cannot be better illustrated than by relating a few personal encounters with him.

September 27, 1861, was an appointed day for humiliation, fasting and prayer, and was generally observed throughout the North. We operators on the military telegraph were extra vigilant at our posts; our boy George was engaged in preparing a 'Daniel's battery' when, shortly after noon, Mr. Lincoln entered the War Department office. Spy-

ing George, he accosted him with "Well, sonny, mixing the juices, eh?" Then taking a seat in a large arm-chair and adjusting his spectacles, he became aware that we were very busy. A smile broke over his face as he saluted us with "Gentlemen, this is fast day, and I am pleased to observe that you are working as fast as you can; the proclamation was mine, and that is my interpretation of its bearing upon you." Then, changing the subject, he said, "Now, we will have a little talk with Governor Morton, at Indianapolis. I want to give him a lesson in geography. Bowling Green affair I set him all right upon; now I will tell him something about Muldraugh Hill. Morton is a good fellow, but at times he is the skeeredest man I know of."

It was customary for Mr. Lincoln to make frequent calls at the war telegraph office, either for the purpose of direct telegraphic communication or to obtain what he called news. One day in September, 1861, accompanied by Mr. Seward, he dropped into the office with a pleasant "Good morning; what news?" Responding to the salutation, I replied, "Good news, because none." Whereupon he rejoined, "Ah! my young friend, that rule don't always hold good, for a fisherman don't consider it good luck when he can't get a bite."

On another day, also accompanied by Secretary Seward, he came into the office. They seemed to have escaped from some one who had been boring them, and the President appeared to be greatly relieved as he sank into an arm-chair, saying, "By Jings, Governor, we are here." Mr. Seward turned to him and, in a manner of semi-reproof, said, "Mr. President, where did you learn that inelegant expression?" Without replying, Mr. Lincoln turned to us and said, "Young gentlemen, excuse me for swearing before you; by jings is swearing, for my good old mother taught me that anything that had a *by* before it is swearing. I won't do so any more."

Mr. Lincoln was entirely free from political intolerance, although at times he was compelled to permit its exercise by others. I experienced an application of his broad views. A few days prior to the Pennsylvania election, in October, 1861, I went to the White House and reported to the President that I was going over to Pennsylvania for a few days, and that I would leave the war telegraph office in charge of Mr. Homer Bates, who would keep him as thoroughly advised of passing events as I had been doing. With his peculiarly humorous smile breaking over his face, he said, "All right, my young friend, but before you go tell me if you ain't going over to

Pennsylvania to vote?" I replied affirmatively, adding that it would be my first vote in my native State. Upon his questioning me still further, I told him I was a Democrat in politics, and expected to vote for the ticket of that party. Then, with the remark "Oh, that's all right! Only be sure you vote for the right kind of Democrats," he bade me good-bye.

On the 27th of August, 1861, our pickets beyond Ball's Cross Roads had been driven in and an attack upon our lines was anticipated, the enemy being reported as advancing in force along the railroad. General McClellan was on the Virginia side giving his personal attention to his command. About nine o'clock in the evening Mr. Lincoln, in company with two other gentlemen, came into the office to be "posted." I told the President that General McClellan was on his way from Arlington to Fort Cochrane, that our picket's still held Ball's and Bailey's Cross Roads, and that no firing had been heard since sunset. The President then inquired if any firing had been heard *before* sunset, and upon my replying there had been none reported, laughingly said, "That puts me in mind of a party who, in speaking of a freak of nature, described it as a child who was black from the hips down, and, upon being

asked the color from the hips up, replied *black*, as a matter of course."

I could go on indefinitely relating such anecdotes, but I refrain, and will conclude by saying:

Abraham Lincoln will live in the correct history of his times as one who was unflinching in his devotion to duty, unswerving in his fidelity to a great cause; one whose every breath poured forth the purest sentiments of patriotism; and as one who tried to live a manly life within the bounds of his comprehension of manhood's aims and duties.









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